

Expert Consultation on the Development of the World Bank's New Education Strategy

Friday, March 26, 2010, 9:00 am – 1:00 pm

[Center for Universal Education](#) at Brookings, 1775 Massachusetts Ave NW, Washington, DC

On March 26, the [Center for Universal Education](#) at Brookings hosted an expert consultation on the development of the World Bank Group's new Education Strategy. The consultative meeting brought together a small group of experts from diverse fields. The purpose of the discussion was to gather input and suggestions aimed at strengthening the World Bank Group's work in the education sector.

[Elizabeth King, Director of Education in the Human Development Network at the World Bank](#), opened the event by providing an overview of the Bank's current approach to education, and how it has evolved over the last several decades. She described the Bank's priorities as reconnecting education to the broader development agenda, supporting more equitable access, ensuring better learning, and strengthening education systems. The Bank's main operating principals are taking a whole-sector approach, building the evidence base in education, and measuring the results and impact. Beginning with this [extensive consultation process](#), the Bank is demonstrating its willingness to work with others in the development community to build a larger and more robust evidence base from which to draw lessons to improve the quality of limited staff to maximize the impact of Bank activities, to underscore its commitment to partnerships with other organizations and civil society groups, and to move toward improving the measurement of results so as to be able to further improve the Bank's education programs around the world.

King then addressed the recent financial crisis, noting that past studies have shown a 10-year lag in the recovery of aid following an economic crisis, which will be a challenge for improving, and even maintaining, education programs around the world as donor and partner country economies rebuild. King said that emerging themes in the new education strategy have included stressing the importance of education to the broad development agenda and better integration with specific development sectors; a shift in focus from "education for all" to "learning for all" and the cost implications of such a change; the role and relative importance of other education subsectors relative to primary education, such as zero to five, out of school youth, and adult education programs. King tasked the group with identifying gaps in the education programming in the hopes that the Bank will better serve as a resource for developing countries.

Throughout the discussion, it was clear that the World Bank has a number of strengths upon which it should draw as it formulates its new education strategy. Participants also highlighted the weaknesses and gaps that the Bank should strive to fill as it moves forward. In particular, given its size and comparative advantages in the development sphere, the true strength of the World Bank to positively influence development has not been adequately capitalized upon. The Bank plays an important role in influencing developing countries, and can use this role to a larger and more positive extent. The Bank could do this by making priorities such as improving the effectiveness of education systems in developing countries (i.e. increase the focus on outcomes rather than inputs).

While many countries are on track to reach 100 percent primary school intake over the next 15 years, it is clear that few will reach universal completion of primary school, which could have serious impact on future generations and long-term development. Despite rising enrollment rates, children are not learning in many countries, and addressing the high dropout rates is one of the biggest challenges in education that should be addressed in the Bank's strategy. The best available evidence of learning comes from the international assessments that focus on the upper grades. There is more need for information on basic literacy and numeracy attainment. One suggestion was to complement existing international learning assessments by systematically gathering information on whether children and youth in various levels of education can read

a basic sentence. This, it was suggested, would be powerful tool for comparing learning outcomes both within and across countries, and would be an important way of changing the terms of the educational debates over the next decade.

The biggest challenges in global education differ by stakeholder group. For example, from a politician's standpoint, the biggest education concern may be the pending youth bulge and developing relevant skills for work; however, a disadvantaged family in a developing country is more likely focused on how to access basic education and acquiring fundamental literacy skills. Over the next 10 years, other topics that will rise in importance are issues related to teachers, including their identity and motivation; the political economy of education reform that moves beyond the technocratic aspects; the impacts of climate change and education's unique role in supporting climate change adaptation; and gender equality.

It was suggested that a more continuous and holistic approach to the education sector would be beneficial, including increased attention to and financing for universal early childhood development (ECD), drawing on the research that shows an impact on reducing internal inefficiencies in education systems, such as on-time enrollment, reduced repetition rates and lower dropouts, from stronger support of early childhood development, which includes parent education and community-based early childhood care.

At the secondary level, school-to-work transitions are poorly integrated into the education system, and many students are not prepared for the jobs available in their country. Despite the funding levels and increased interest, technical and vocational education is still relatively ineffective. In considering preparation for transition to the labor force, policies and practices need to consider the position of women in the labor market and other gender dimensions.

Further, since many adults are illiterate, adult education programs should include fundamental literacy and numeracy and not just focus on workforce training. It was recommended that the World Bank considers all these levels and their interaction when it looks at education programming over the next decade.

The global education architecture is in dire need for reform. Strategic decisions by individual development organizations are taken in isolation, even though the same countries are on the decision-making boards of the various organizations. The example of adult literacy was given, highlighting that it does not appear to be the focus of any of the major multi-lateral education agencies (e.g. World Bank, UNESCO, UNICEF) largely because of isolated strategic planning and a central lack of over-arching leadership in the global education sector. The World Bank is major player and it needs to operate in partnerships while using its comparative advantage as a global body with significant convening power to take a leadership role in setting the global education policy agenda. The Bank should think about leveraging its size to influence education work in the development sector, possibly acting as an external compliance mechanism that speaks out when countries do not act appropriately in education.

The World Bank's research capacity is one comparative advantage that can help make the case for education. The Bank does a large amount of research, but should make translating its findings into policy a higher priority. Learning from various country case studies is important for building its knowledge base. The Bank should translate this into good practices and policy recommendations, especially those that help countries implement better national education plans and programs. In addition to its own research, the Bank should utilize other resources to leverage its own findings. However, evidence-based work can be a double-edged sword: people use it to support what they already believe in and what they have already been doing. In pushing forward, it is critical to analyze this evidence: origin, method, quality, and outcomes.

In recent years the World Bank and others have moved away from presenting the returns on investment in education and focused more intently on positioning access to quality education as a basic human right to be upheld. While the rights-based argument is important, the Bank's capacity to conduct economic analyses makes its well-positioned to quantify the returns on education and be at the forefront of pushing the importance of education at all levels. Moreover, reconnecting education to economic growth is very important as the demand increases for secondary and tertiary education opportunities. Both are more costly to implement and successful scale-up will require a strong case for their returns. The World Bank is

well-placed to be the purveyor of the public good of learning. It is important to think strategically about how to make that happen. In addition to disseminating the research findings and policy recommendations down through the decentralized institutional structure, the Bank must also actively disseminate it externally.

The inequalities in education need to be addressed, as there are grave costs associated with equity gaps, such as conflict and violence. A potential shift to focusing on the quality of education cannot ignore the fact that there are still many children who do not have access to school. It was recommended that the Bank pay special attention to marginalized groups and their access to education; further marginalized groups are often lost in the standard curriculum when they enter school, a fact which needs to be considered in quality of education debate. In discussing equity, there is a need for more economic analysis as well. What are the costs of these equity gaps and the prioritization of quantity over quality?

Since it works closely with national governments, the Bank should take a lead on promoting country-driven initiatives and working toward relevant education for all. Children are not learning what they need to be productive members of society and to contribute to poverty reduction and economic growth, including skills like critical thinking, adaptability, financial literacy, and conflict resolution. The question was posed, “Are the skills being measured by education exams those most valuable to the country?” International assessments of learning do not typically assess important skills needed for the 21st century, such as effectively living in diverse societies and adapting to changing economic contexts.

With respect to teachers, the World Bank was encouraged to start a dialogue of the role of teachers and teachers’ learning as they impact student learning. Participants raised questions about the role that teachers may play in achieving and maintaining gender parity in education, citing that girls’ higher dropout rates may be attributed to teacher attitudes towards girls. Further, decentralization of the education system from the Bank could disperse information to teachers in the field, perhaps helping solve some of the teacher training gaps. The demographics of the teaching profession, with massive retirement leading to massive recruitment and hiring, provides a window of opportunity to make significant changes in the ways things are done.

Climate change will greatly affect all development sectors in the coming decades, and the education sector will have to face this challenge. In addition to the fact that improved access to education and better economic opportunities for women reduce fertility rates which could have a massive impact on future emissions scenarios, it was also noted that education has a unique role in promoting climate change awareness and adaptation, and that the Bank should consider how to incorporate this interaction between education and environment into its strategy.

Fragile states need more attention from the Bank, particularly in terms of education leadership and sustainable programming. For example, six-month long education programs for child soldiers in conflict-affected states did little to respond to long-term development needs and were not integrated into the formal education sector. A long-recognized chasm between humanitarian and development aid could be one area where the World Bank could exercise its leadership, smoothing the transition between the two in conflict-affected and fragile states. An inefficiency that has resulted from this deep divide is the loss of innovation. The World Bank and other global partners have failed to capitalize on the introduction of new ideas in disaster situations in the humanitarian sector by not connecting these innovations to the longer-term development process. The education sector as a whole is relatively conservative in nature. Innovations by civil society generally and in contexts of recovery and reconstruction could be better incorporated into longer-term education programs at the Bank. The Bank should consider improving its engagement with civil society actors as an important step in fostering innovation and improved outcomes on the ground. Moreover, the Bank should consider the opportunity to build education systems anew after humanitarian crisis. By focusing on decentralization, the language of instruction needs, and ethnicity requirements, the needs of refugees and internally displaced persons can be addressed and incorporated into the learning system. Given its ongoing work with governments in many countries, the Bank may be best-positioned to facilitate changes in systems where central planning has been compromised.

It was noted that the Bank has not sufficiently engaged private sector actors. The role of the private sector in meeting the education demand across all education levels is important to consider. Many of the private

players are large in size and are growing steadily; it would be wise to engage all partners in the conversation of improving education access and quality to maximize results for developing countries. The Bank could rely on its comparative advantage as a large convening body to bring private actors to the table and discuss education strategies and best practices. Further, the Bank was encouraged to review the growing literature about the private sector in primary education and the way the Bank might build on this work.

In response to the discussion, King addressed several key points and noted that others would clearly require deeper thinking by her team as they work on the first draft of the strategy. She said the Bank purposefully does not address learning past age 24 in the forthcoming education strategy; although life-long learning is a valid concern, the Bank has to focus their approach and their resources for the most impact and she called upon the Bank's partners to take up adult learning. King said the Bank understands that others are urging it to "make more noise" in the education sector, and use its size to an advantage. She said the Bank is working on strategies to get evidence and information to its increasingly decentralized staff around the world in an effort to utilize the extent of knowledge and information the Bank has amassed. She said that they will focus on more school-to-work programming into the strategy, as it is an important transition for many children. Further, the Bank hopes to continue decentralization processes at the country level, which would allow not only local governments but also schools to control their curriculum to help address the differences in educational needs by region and sub-region such as language and culture. While recognizing the need to better train teachers for the job, the World Bank is still searching for new ways to better address this global need. The push for innovation in the education sector is vital but it must be accompanied with impact evaluations. The sector as a whole needs to learn from demonstration projects that innovate and then determine where to go to scale with a new idea.

Even after devising a new, comprehensive strategy derived from extensive consultation, it is important to consider the question, "How does a donor government convince its citizens that aid is working?" With studies that say children are not learning in school, what incentives to donor governments have to continue aid and how will they convince their constituents that sending money to foreign countries is worthwhile? Participants addressed the question and said that there are numerous reasons to support development that can be sold to politicians, including national security and disease prevention, among others.

Participants posited a strategy for "selling education" to politicians, as education has struggled to attract the necessary level of aid dollars from donor countries. The World Bank and its partners need to first focus on the incredible successes achieved so far, then identify the most pressing needs of the sector while explaining why education is important within the broader development goals, and finally, focus on a particular "hook" such as the high number of girls who still remain out of school worldwide. This approach would appeal to both the hearts and minds of the public, tapping into their interests and concerns, and enable policymakers to advocate for increased aid for education.

In closing, King expressed her deep appreciation for the generous time and thoughtful input of the participants. The Bank will continue further consultations in other countries to ensure a wide variety of input from a diverse set of stakeholders. While acknowledging that these suggestions would be considered as the strategy developed, she cautioned participants to realize that, by definition, the strategy will need to tactically select which ideas are most important and viable from the perspective and position of the World Bank.